

PUBLICATION

Client Interview – Jennifer F. Nelson, Senior Associate General Counsel, Prestige Consumer Healthcare, Inc.

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Can you tell us about the various leadership positions you have held throughout your career and the basics of how you achieved those positions?



I've been serving on the Small Law Department Management Committee Board of the Association of Corporate Counsel for about three years now in various capacities. This is a great way to network, learn about other in-house legal department metrics and SOPs, and stay abreast of and work through the issues typically faced by in-house attorneys. Informally, I have served as a mentor of sorts during many of the recent years of my career. In my prior position as General Counsel at The Maesa Group, a B2B/CPG beauty company, I had the pleasure to work with many young women facing life/career decisions, including whether to keep working after having their first child, how to balance dating and working crazy hours, etc. I've been told that I am quite approachable, and

some of the women I spoke to said they looked up to me, mentioning it seems like I "had it all" by having a great work-life balance where I am able to continue a career and have a successful family life. It has been a privilege to tell my experiences and have these women gain a perspective they might not otherwise have had as to what their lives could look like in the future. I'm not saying that my path is/was the best way to go – it was just how I got to where I am now.

Think about the most challenging time in your career. How did you pull through it and use the lessons learned to propel you to success?

Hands-down, the most challenging time in my career was at a point when I was six months pregnant with my first child. My then-current husband and I had both been clerking for judges on the Tax Court in Washington, D.C., and were both interviewing for permanent legal positions towards the end of our termed clerkships. His judge advised that he should interview with a prominent law firm in Corpus Christi, Texas; so, in turn, I sought some prospects there as well. I interviewed with (then one of the "Big 8" accounting firms) Peat Marwick and was extended an offer. However, my spouse failed to receive an offer for himself, and followed his judge's advice to go to a law firm in NYC. So back to the drawing board I went and started my mass-mailing to firms in NYC and working through Georgetown University Law Center's career office to interview. By that time, I was definitely "showing," and although the Pregnancy Discrimination Act was in place at the time, in my experience it was not enforced (or maybe I wasn't qualified for the jobs I interviewed for). In any event, I was unable to secure even a follow-up second interview and had no prospects. So I found myself about to give birth with no job and no prospect. After having my daughter, I tried to go back to work through consulting and temporary legal gigs. I was nursing my daughter, and there was no accommodation for that. I finally gave up and decided to work for my father's marketing research firm part-time, while doing real estate closings on the side. This got me through to three years later, when I had my son, and carried me into early years of nurturing both children. By the time both were in all-day school, I was itching to get back into the legal workforce full-time and set out to do just that. The challenge was marketing my brand such that prospective employers would recognize my worth, even though I hadn't been in the workforce for some time. One law firm took a chance on me, and that was the start of a great second wave of my career as an attorney.

What advice do you have for law firm leaders to attract, retain and promote women lawyers?

The advice I have for law firm leaders (and companies in connection with in-house counsel) is the following:

- Show by example; make sure to have a decent representation of women in all positions of your firm/company;
- Make sure management/leadership committees reflect a good female representation;
- Be very mindful of male dominance in meetings, discussions and delegation of responsibilities. Women do not need special treatment; however, social mores sometimes result in males taking for granted that their leadership is superior to a woman's; and
- Promote from within, and make sure it is never gender-based, but rather always based on prior achievement and a candidate's qualifications.

I am happy to say that my present position at Prestige Brands Holdings, Inc. – an OTC, Household and Cosmetics CPG company – has proved to be a move to a company that encompasses all of the foregoing. Our CFO is a brilliant woman who I have already recognized (after only three months) as a strong and effective leader. Our Board of Directors and Steering Committee include intelligent women, and our New Product Development and Regulatory departments are headed by exceptionally talented women. I have personally found myself in meetings at Prestige Brands, expecting "maninterrupting" and/or "mansplaining" and can happily announce that I have absolutely experienced quite the opposite!

What are the challenges of being a woman at a senior level either within a law firm or in your current industry?

I'd definitely say the main challenge of being a woman at a senior level is the disparity of salary that can occur at higher levels. I've found that given my experience, salary has always been disparate from my opposite-gender brethren. Although I am not okay with this, I understand that change is abounding. Sometimes it is difficult to compare apples to apples in the legal realm, especially when a woman has taken some time to raise her children. While I don't have an answer to this conundrum, I can say that playing a victim to this challenge is not helpful. I've tried to work through these types of issues throughout my career by keeping my perspective as positive and hopeful as possible, buckling down to do the best work I can and making sure that I am heard when proffering legal and business counsel.

What advice would you give to an aspiring female professional?

Some advice that I have given (and would continue to give) is:

- Keep your self-confidence high by working hard, being prepared and anticipating questions, concerns and pitfalls before meetings;
- Recognize the environment of the firm/company by whom you are employed, and decide for yourself whether it is livable; if not, then effectuate change (either within or without) for yourself (within reason, of course);
- Do not be afraid of work overload or hard work – just compartmentalize and understand that speedy turnaround is not always helpful; and
- Listen well – be mindful of what others are telling you, saying to you, advising you, asking of you – and respond thoughtfully, not rashly.

Do you have any life hacks that give you that extra edge?

I still go by the motto "dress for success." I may be old-fashioned in this thinking, but I do it for myself. When I feel confident in what I'm wearing, from clothes, to makeup, to hairstyle, to fragrance, I exude that confidence outward. People react positively to confidence. Another life hack: GET ENOUGH SLEEP! Do not skimp on the zzzzzz's, as this is so important to help you concentrate, and if there's one element to being an attorney that is pivotal, it's that we can concentrate!

Are there any real no-nos when it comes to working your way up the corporate or professional ladder?

The main one that comes to mind is to not use your sexuality with men in order to get there. I'm not suggesting that you must account for other peoples' reactions to you or behavior, but you can account for yours. Be professional at all times (and this certainly includes your persona on social media).

Can you name someone you particularly admire and tell us why?

YES! Sara Moss, Estee Lauder's General Counsel. She is my idol. To quote Mercedes Meyer in her February 3, 2015 profile of Sara Moss, she, "like any true New Yorker, is tough, sensitive, and has a big heart." Like Sara, I was a cheerleader in high school and eventually married my high school sweetheart (after nearly 28 years apart). Sara has had a remarkable career, and I aspire to achieve even one-tenth of what she has done during hers.